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Title	The Double Meaning and Ambiguity of Language
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Citation	NIDABA , 10 : 11 - 17
Issue Date	1981-03-31
DOI	
Self DOI	
URL	https://ir.lib.hiroshima-u.ac.jp/00046382
Right	
Relation	



The Double Meaning and Ambiguity of Language

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(A) Different Perception and Imitation of Sounds

Our auditory organ is not capable of perceiving sounds, natural or artificial, exactly as they are, nor is our speech organ, of giving a perfect imitation of sounds. In other words, the same sound is perceived or uttered differently according to individuals or communities. This is illustrated by the different combination, chosen and more or less conventionalized by different nations, for the same natural sound; thus English, says Jespersen in his Language, page 398, has cock-a-doodle-doo; Danish, Kykeliky; Swedish, Kukeliku; German, Kikeriki; French, Coquerico, for the sound of a cock. These imitated sounds, while they have the /k/ sound in common, are more or less different from each other. Such similarities and differences in perception and utterance of the sound, for instance, of a cock, are observed among peoples of the Far East, too.

Even the same nations or speaking communities perceive and imitate the same sounds differently in different ages. For instance, bow-wow /bau wau/, the imitation of a dog's bark, and moo /mu:/, the sound made by a cow or ox, may have been perceived before the 17th century as /bu: wu:/ and /mo:/, respectively, before the great vowel-shift; and hum /hʌm/, the sound made by bees, as /hum/.

A nation or nations, as a whole, is susceptible to dissimilar perception of sounds; each individual is far more susceptible as he is only one component of a speaking community.

Three reporters were interviewing a woman and one thought she had referred to a reindeer. A second was sure that she had told something about the train deer. The third insisted that he heard her say trained ear. So the reporters asked her to repeat what she had said.

"I told you," she explained, "that I had been out in the country last week and was asking my husband if it rained here." (Esar, English 150)

(B) Word-Linking or Combining

Again, forms or structures of the English language as spoken language are often misleading. Words, semantic or grammatical units, are seldom pronounced separately when they have once been formed into a group; they are combined into a series of breath groups, and sometimes sound as single words. Mistakes are unavoidable in analyzing the breath groups into isolated words, or in deciding or establishing the relation of words coming one after another.

Sir Toby: "Fie, that you'll say no! He plays o' the viol-de-gamboys, and speaks three or four languages word for word without book, and hath all the good gifts of nature."

Maria: "He hath indeed, almost natural ..."
(Shakespeare, Twelfth Night, 1,iii,30)

(Note: According to K. Deighton, Dyce follows Upton in reading, 'he hath indeed, all, most natural.')

(C) Manifold Meanings and Functions of Words

Many words in common use, especially the so-called form-words such as prepositions and conjunctions, have a number of meanings, original and transferred. Also, there are some words which are identical or similar in form or sound, although different in origin and meaning. Under these circumstances, there inevitably arises a case of confusion where the speaker uses a word in one meaning, while the hearer understands it in another meaning.

Viola: "Save thee, friend, and thy music: dost thou live by the tabor?"

Clown: "No, Sir, I live by the church."

Viola: "Art thou a churchman?"

Clown: "No such matter, sir: I do live by the church; for I do live at my house, and my house doth

stand by the church."
(Shakespeare, Twelfth Night, III, i, 1)

Some words, not a few in number, function in two or more ways, thus expressing as many meanings. For instance, the double interpretation of the underlined in the following quotation comes from the function of the verb which can be used transitively as well as intransitively.

Moth: "And out of heart, Master; All those three
I will prove?"

Armado: "What wilt thou prove?"

Moth: "A man if I live; and this, by, in, and
without, upon the instant: by heart you love her, ..."
(Shakespeare, Love's Labour Lost, III, i, 40)

(D) Ambiguous Relations of Sentence Constituents

Many sentences are built up of two or more constituents, which are more or less closely related with each other to make complete sense. The relations are determined chiefly by the meaning of each constituent, the word order, the inflexional forms, the agreement, the pause, the pitch or stress of the voice. In spite of these determiners, however, a sentence often proves to be provided with inherent factors of making the relation equivocal or obscure, forming double-entendre. At any rate, this I can affirm, that one constituent is capable of being understood by the hearer to be joined with a third one. The following quotation from Shakespeare, Othello, II, i, 22, shows that an independent element of a sentence, nominative of address, which has no definite grammatical connection with the sentence, merges into the main part, changing the significance of the whole sentence.

Cassio: "Dost thou hear, my honest friend?"

Clown: "No, I hear not your honest friend, I hear
you."

(E) Elliptical Nature of Expression

What is more, those forms of expression, of which the inner meaning, psychic value or intensity, varies freely with attention or the selective interest of the mind, are seldom set out in full.

The speaker wishes to express some special aspect of a subject and usually neglects something not essential to his main idea, regardless of whether such omission or negligence renders the statement grammatically or logically incomplete or even at times inaccurate. But ellipsis inevitably brings about difference in the interpretation of the unexpressed words between both parties of the conversation.

Friar: "You come hither, my lord, to marry this lady?"

Claudio: "No!"

Leonato: "To be married to her: friar, you come to marry her."

(Shakespeare, Much Ado About Nothing, IV, i, 4)

In Claudio's statement the main part of the sentence is omitted after no; hence it is not certain whether he denounces the forthcoming marriage to 'this lady (=Hero)', or whether he refuses to do the function of a friar, who joins persons, one to another, in wedlock. The word 'marry' has several meanings, such as 'to take in marriage', 'to unite in wedlock', 'to give in marriage'. Below is given one more instance of difference in interpretation due to ellipsis, which is quite self-evident.

Father: "Are there half fares for children?"

Conductor: "Yes, under fourteen."

Father: "That's all right. I've only five."

(Copeland, 99)

It is often observed that the more fully complete the speaker attempts to be by enumerating all nonessentials, the less intelligible he becomes.

The reason it takes so long to try a case in court is not the long speeches the lawyers make, but the fact that it takes so much time to explain what the lawyers are talking about.

Grandpa Snazzy was once called as a witness. The lawyer said: "Now, Mr. Snazzy, did you or did you not, on the date in question or at any time previously or subsequently, say or even intimate to the defendant or anyone else, whether friend or mere acquaintance or in fact a stranger, that the statement imputed to you, whether just or unjust and denied by the plaintiff, was a matter of no moment or otherwise?"

Grandpa thought a while and then said, "Did I or did I not what?"

(F) Arbitrary and Illogical Nature of Language

The English language is not a product of logic, but one of human habits, full of irrationality and inconsistency. Language depends for its being upon idioms, which consist of an immense accumulation of verbal habits. Accordingly, priority is always allotted to idioms and not to logic or grammar when they do not agree. The statement of the husband in the joke quoted below may be rejected as a sophism in everyday life from the standpoint of idiom, though it is logically beyond confutation.

"Whaddy yappin' about?" screamed the drunk at his nagging wife. "I got in a quarter of twelve."

"You did not, you drunken louse," said the scold. "I heard the clock strike three."

"Well, shtupid," he cooed, "Ain't three a quarter of twelve?"

Although idiom or long-established practice is a decisive factor in construing the meaning, yet the logical inference plays a funny trick upon one's mind.

Sign on a boat: Nice Trip Around the Lake.
Men: 15 Cents; Ladies: 10 Cents; Children: Thrown in
Free. (Lewis 52)

Some years ago Winston Churchill highly amused his fellow Members in the House by distributing among them printed copies of his recent speeches. A liberal Member for one of the Devonshire constituencies acknowledged the gift in the following manner:

"Dear Mr. Churchill, Thanks for a copy of your speeches, lately delivered in the House of Commons. To quote Lord Beaconsfield: "I shall lose no time in reading them."

Again, an idiom is arbitrary and treacherous. It accepts one form or use as legitimate, but rejects another form or use similar to the accepted one.

Launcelot (Aside): "O heavens, this is my true begotten father; who, being more than sand-blind, high-gravel-blind, knows me not;

(Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice, II, ii, 36)

The idiomatic expression recognizes 'sand-blind' 'stone-blind', but not 'high-gravel-blind', which intervened phrase is in harmony with the comic atmosphere of the scene.

(G) Lack of Grammatical Forms

A language has peculiar grammatical forms of its own, by means of which ideas or feelings are embodied and expressed. The speaking community, when these forms are resorted to, feels no inconvenience in expressing itself, but if it were possessed of more forms, it could avoid many errors and confusions. To cite an instance, the lack in the English language of a fourth type of personal pronoun, distinguishing between different persons and things, may be held responsible for the type of interpretation which led to the following fatal error:

The blacksmith was instructing a novice in way to treat a horseshoe. "I'll bring the shoe from the fire and lay it on the anvil. When I nod my head, hit it with this hammar."

The apprentice did exactly as he was told, but he'll never hit a blacksmith again! (Copeland, 12)

It should be borne in mind, however, that structural ambiguity and double meaning enumerated above occur with much less frequency in speech than in writing since some (not all) of them are avoided in speech by means of intonation including stress, pitch or juncture.

要 旨

我々が意志伝達をする場合に誤解や思い違いが起る場合がある。その大部分は言語行為者の責任であって、彼らの不注意、無知などにその原因が帰されるべきであるが、時にはその責任は行為者ではなく、原因はむしろ、その使用されている言語の機能自身に内在している場合がある。例えば、言語形式の中には二つ、あるいはそれ以上の意味に解釈され、分析されることが可能な場合がある。その場合聞き手（あるいは読者）は、話し手（あるいは著者）が意図していた概念とは異なった意味にその言語形式を解釈することがあり得るのである。実はこの言語形式の意味的二重性、あいまいさを逆手にとって、古くから多くのコミカルな作品、ジョーク等が書かれてきている。本稿では、これらがどのようなものであったかを英語について分析し、論じたいと思う。